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The Moral Argument for God's Existence; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Godless Morality

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In the late 1990s, I revealed my atheism to my deeply Christian girlfriend. She blinked, thought for a moment, then slowly asked: "So. . . do you have morals?" I did indeed have morals, though like most people I don't always live up to them. But the question expresses an anxiety that runs through western thought, an anxiety that afflicts both believers and non-believers: if there is no God, is anything truly objectively good or bad, moral or immoral? And even if it is, without God do we have any reason to care about morality? In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov declares that without God or a future life "everything is permitted." Contemporary novelist James Morrow imagines a scenario in which God dies and his huge body plummets into the sea. The angel Raphael recruits a former oil tanker captain to tow God's body above the Arctic Circle to preserve it and hide it from humanity. When the crew discovers the nature of their cargo, many of them run amuck. Morrow's novel *Towing Jehovah* vividly depicts the anxiety about what a godless universe would mean for morality: "Wall to wall, the courtyard vibrated with a combination binge, bacchanal, orgy, brawl, and disco tourney, with many revelers participating in all five possibilities – drinking, eating, fornicating, fighting, and dancing – simultaneously." Non-believers like Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus have grappled with what they see as the devastating implications for ordinary morality of the death of God. Others, like Immanuel Kant, C.S. Lewis, and contemporary Christian apologist William Lane Craig have sought to leverage anxiety about God and morality into arguments that God is real – or at least, that we have reason to believe that God is real. Although the relationship with my

girlfriend eventually ended, the anxiety and questions persisted: did it make sense to embrace objective morality while doubting God? If so, how?

There are many distinct worries about God and morality, and many corresponding types of moral argument for the existence of God. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus saw philosophy as therapy that could empower us by showing that many of our common fears have no rational basis. Following Epicurus's example, I will offer here a catalog of some common worries about God and morality and try to put these worries to rest.

Fear Number One: without God, nothing is truly good or bad. In his book *Reasonable Faith*, William Craig declares that "without God, good and evil do not exist – there is only the bare valueless fact of existence." The key to getting over this fear is to see that if anything is genuinely good or bad, then some things are *intrinsically* good or bad – they carry their goodness or badness entirely within themselves, and it is not derived from an outside source. Lots of things – money being a clear example – are good or bad depending on how they are used, or what they lead to. But a little reflection suggests that other things carry their value entirely within themselves. One day, driving home from work, I witnessed a child on a bicycle hit a large bump in the sidewalk, fall off his bike, split his lip, and burst into tears. Suppose there is no God to observe this minor disaster; the child's pain and fear are nevertheless bad, as they carry their badness in themselves. Imagine yourself lying on a beach, warmed by the sun, as a gentle breeze washes over you and you embrace your lover. Just as he or she leans in to whisper sweet nothings in your ear, a Craigian anxiety pops into your mind: is anything *truly* good happening here if God doesn't exist? The absurdity of the worry is apparent as soon as it crosses your mind – your activity carries its goodness within itself.

Craig's declaration of the valuelessness of a Godless universe is based on a vision of morality in which God is the only being with intrinsic value and union with God is the only activity with intrinsic value. But this is a philosopher's overly-systematic fantasy – the truth is, to borrow a phrase from contemporary philosopher Wes Morriston, that our world is "drenched with value, both positive and negative." There is not merely one ultimate Intrinsic Good from which all other good and evil in the world is derived; rather, there is a multitude of intrinsic goods and evils scattered throughout our world. By their very nature, such goods and evils do not depend on God for their value.

Fear Number Two: without God, nothing is morally required – we have no true moral obligations, and so nothing we do is morally wrong. As Ivan Karamazov put it, everything is (morally) permitted.

This is perhaps the most common worry about God and morality. It even has its own slogan: "No moral law without a lawmaker." In his 1952 book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis argues both that there are certain real, universal moral obligations that are shared by all human beings and that these moral obligations must have their origin in a "Higher Power". Defenders of this sort of argument seem to be in the grips of a picture of moral obligation in which obligations can come into existence only be being handed down by a higher authority. Parents impose moral obligations on their children; commanders impose moral obligations on their troops; kings impose moral obligations on their subjects. So, if there are moral obligations shared by all human beings, then there must be an authority higher than all of us to generate such obligations – God. Such thinking leads our old friend William Craig to declare, in a debate with atheist philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, that "[o]n the atheistic view, there's nothing really *wrong* with your

raping someone." On Craig's view, only divine commands have the power to generate genuine moral obligations: if there's no God, then there are no divine commands, and hence no genuine moral obligations.

The mistake in this picture of moral obligation is taking *one* source of moral obligation to be the *only* possible source of moral obligation. The key to getting over this fear lies in seeing that what our moral obligations are is a function of the overall weight of the various moral considerations or reasons in play in any given situation. We saw earlier that our world contains many intrinsic goods and evils; these goods and evils provide reasons for and against certain courses of action and thereby give rise to moral obligations. Last year I had the opportunity to debate William Craig on the topic of objective morality (check out our debate on YouTube!). During that debate, I brought up the following example: suppose you had a choice between preventing a million Holocausts and taking a nice nap. My modest proposal is that in such a situation, the tremendous intrinsic evil of a million Holocausts generates powerful reasons to prevent the Holocausts and these reasons in turn generate a moral obligation to skip the nap. To be morally obligated to do a certain thing is for the balance of moral reasons to favor doing that thing; in this scenario, the moral reasons clearly favor preventing the Holocausts. Since intrinsic goods and evils abound in the world, so do moral obligations – even if there is no God.

Fear Number Three: without God, we have no reason to care about doing what's right or about fulfilling our moral obligations.

This fear may be understood in two ways. It might be understood broadly, as the fear that without God, we have no reasons *of any kind* to fulfill our moral obligations. Or it might be understood more narrowly, as the fear that we have no reasons of *self-interest* to fulfill our moral

obligations – that without God to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked, there's no guarantee that fulfilling our moral obligations will benefit us in the long run.

The broad fear is easily put to rest: if we truly have a moral obligation to do something – like, say, forego a nap in order to prevent a million Holocausts – then we have powerful moral reasons to do that thing – namely, the very reasons that generate the obligation in the first place.

The narrower fear is harder to put to rest. For without God, there's no guarantee of a perfect match between morality and self-interest in the long run. So what sort of argument for God's existence might this give rise to? One like this: First, without God, there's no guarantee of a perfect match between morality and self-interest in the long run; second, there *is* a guarantee of a perfect match between morality and self-interest in the long run; therefore, God exists. An obvious weakness in this argument is that it's hard to see any theism-independent justification for the second step. Of course if you already believe in God then you'll believe that God guarantees that morality and self-interest coincide in the long run, but it's hard to see what reason non-believers have to accept the second step of the argument. The argument seems compelling only if you're already in the theist camp, which renders it ineffective as a tool for converting non-believers.

The fear that there isn't a perfect match between morality and self-interest is a fear that must be faced rather than put to rest. Sometimes doing the right thing sucks for you; that's life. But this fact of life might give rise to another more serious fear:

Fear Number Four: If morality and self-interest don't always coincide, and people come to recognize this, they'll always pursue self-interest over morality.

This fear is about the psychological and sociological effects that widespread acceptance

of atheism might have; it's the fear expressed in Morrow's novel *Towing Jehovah* by the oil tanker crew run amuck when they discover that they are towing God's corpse and so they needn't fear divine punishment. The worry is that if people believe they won't get in trouble for acting immorally, then they'll act immorally whenever doing so benefits them. A version of this worry is expressed in a famous thought experiment offered by the character Glaucon in Plato's dialogue *Republic*. Glaucon imagines a ring that gives its wearer the power of invisibility; anyone who possesses the ring can do whatever they want with impunity. Glaucon invites us to imagine two rings, one given to the most moral person we know, the other given to the most immoral person we know. According to Glaucon, both people would act in the same way, pursuing their own self-interest with no regard for morality.

Fortunately, there is ample evidence from psychology, sociology, and everyday experience that suggests that most people do care to some extent about morality for its own sake. As thinkers from the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius to 18th-century philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith to contemporary primatologist Frans de Waal have pointed out, the capacity for compassion is as much a part of human nature as self-interest. The absence of compassion in human beings is so strikingly abnormal that it is a central feature of psychopathy, a serious psychological disorder. The fear that without belief in divine punishment people will simply abandon morality is a mere bogeyman. It's essentially the fear that all human beings are psychopaths. Indeed, as sociologist Phil Zuckerman documents in his book *Society without God*, some of the most successful flourishing modern societies are also the least religious societies in human history.

Let's wrap up our therapy session by considering one last fear, one that originates with the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant, who developed it in his impressively titled work

Critique of Practical Reason:

Fear Number Five: we each have a moral obligation to pursue the *highest good* – a situation in which everyone is both perfectly virtuous and perfectly happy. But we can only reasonably believe that this highest good is possible if we believe that God exists to make it possible, and we cannot reasonably pursue the highest good unless we believe that it's possible. Therefore, we cannot reasonably fulfill our moral obligation to pursue the highest good unless we believe in God and hence we have a moral reason to postulate God's existence.

There is much that could be (and has been) said about this Kantian fear, but the simplest way of getting over this fear is to realize that our real moral obligation is simply to get *as close to* the highest good as we can. We need not believe that the highest good is possible to reasonably use it as an ideal to guide our actions. With all the evil and injustice in the world, and without a God who is on the side of goodness and justice, the struggle for the highest good can easily seem futile. But there's an old story that shows why it's not rational to succumb to this sense of futility. It's called "The Star Thrower":

> Once upon a time, there was an old man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach every morning before he began his work. Early one morning, he was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and found the vast beach littered with starfish as far as the eye could see, stretching in both directions. Off in the distance, the old man noticed a small boy approaching. As the boy walked, he paused every so often and as he grew closer, the man could see that he was occasionally bending down to pick up an

> object and throw it into the sea. The boy came closer still and the man called out, "Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?" The young boy paused, looked up, and replied "Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up onto the beach and they can't return to the sea by themselves… When the sun gets high, they will die, unless I throw them back into the water." The old man replied, "But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I'm afraid you won't really be able to make much of a difference." The boy bent down, picked up yet another starfish and threw it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he turned, smiled and said, "It made a difference to that one!"

In a godless universe, we can't save all of the starfish, but we can reasonably hope to save some of them, and that's exactly what we should try to do. So to return to my girlfriend's query: yes, Virginia (not her real name), I do have morals, and thanks to some philosophical therapy, I am confident that they have a rational basis even if there is no God.